Except Ye Repent

By Dr. Harry Ironside

Chapter 17 - BUT IS REPENTANCE DESIRABLE?

And now I come to discuss, in this closing chapter, what many will feel should have been the first question raised and settled: Is repentance after all desirable?

According to much of the humanistic thought of the day there is no occasion whatever to call upon mankind in general to repent. In fact, we are told, he who does so shows that he fails to appreciate man's innate dignity and praiseworthiness. The evolutionist points with pride to the abysmal depths of bestial ancestry from which man has struggled upward to his present exalted position. What some call sin is but the slowly conquered animal traits which, it may be hoped, will be outlived in future centuries. It is not for this magnificent thinking creature to repent of anything, certainly not of his upward progress. If he condemns himself as a "miserable sinner" he fails to appreciate his glorious heritage. He is the child of all the ages; he has come the long, long way from a tiny speck of protoplasm to the dignity of a cultured twentieth century genius. Shall he repent that he is not what he once was? Does he not know that every fall has been a fall upward? Was it not by unceasing struggle with superstition, ignorance, and unwholesome environment that he has reached his present high estate? To command him to repent and to do works meet for repentance is to insult him to his face.

And then there are those who have given their adherence to various highly lauded religious cults of widespread acceptance, all of which are based upon the proposition that man is but a manifestation of God and that what the Bible calls sin is merely an "error of mortal mind." The realization of man's own Deity in order that he may ever be "in tune with the Infinite," and so declare confidently, as Jesus did, that "I and my Father are one" will, we are told, enable us all to demonstrate the essential unity of the human spirit with the divine. But if this be so, there is no place for repentance. Repent of what -- that I am one with God? Surely not. So these teachers, however much they may quarrel among themselves as to terms, all insist that the path of life and the way of peace are to ignore all that seems to be evil and to be occupied alone with the good and the true. "Condemn not thyself," is a favorite saying. And the devotees of all these systems consciously or unconsciously seek to build themselves up in spirituality and to rise to higher moral and ethical planes by means of constant repetition of the Coué formula,

> **"Every day, in every way,**
> **I am getting better and better."**

Of course, this kind of argument is only another form of the old and very familiar philosophy of the bootstrap. We do not have bootstraps on our shoes, but many act as if their minds had something of the kind and they were diligently

trying to lift themselves to higher heights by pulling on them.

Often we are told that it is degrading and belittling to cry "Repent!" We should rather shout, Advance! and forgetting the past reach forth to the better things the future has in store. Did not St. Paul tell us this in his Philippian letter? The answer is, he did not. He himself tells us in that very Epistle how he once gloried in his fleshly religion until the vision of the risen Christ brought him to repentance, so that what things were gain to him he now counted but as offal and as dross in order that He who had manifested Himself to him might henceforth be magnified in him whether by life or death. Now he could forget the things behind and reach forth in holy expectation to the things beyond, "the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

For nearly a century the world has been drinking at the fount of these strange philosophies, and one might have thought that by now, if they were true at all, we would see a great improvement in the human race. But lust, cruelty, corruption, and violence were never more prominent than in these strangely unsettled years since the close of the World War -- the war that was to end all war and henceforth make the world safe for democracy. But the nations are still in turmoil as the iron of imperialism and the miry clay of Sovietism struggle for the mastery. The horrors of the Ethiopian massacres, the unspeakable cruelties of Russian Bolshevism, the bloody strife in Spain, the desperate conditions still prevailing in China, together with ominous forebodings of coming class conflicts all over the so-called civilized world, show that the nations are far from realizing the idealism in which their salvation is supposed to be assured.

No, man is not Godlike. He is not at one with the Infinite mind. He is not a great, heroic figure dominating the ages. He is a poor, needy, sinful creature who will never find the path of peace until he humbles himself before high Heaven and repentantly confesses his manifold iniquities and looks to the cross of Christ and to the Holy Spirit of God for twofold deliverance, justification before God and practical sanctification of life, through the power of the Word applied by Him who alone produces a second birth and comes to indwell all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to the salvation of their souls.

Applied psychology, psychiatry, and ethical culture, will not bring this about. Whatever value there may be in the wise use of these systems, so far as combating certain conditions of the mind is concerned they are utterly powerless to change the heart of man or to produce a new life. J.R. Oliver in a recent volume entitled *Psychiatry and Mental Health,* which is well worth reading, frankly confesses that after all the varied needs of mankind can best be met by "the divine Psychiatrist, the one great Physician of the soul." He rightly declares that if we but know Him and walk with Him, all books on mental science, moral theology, marriage and birth control, with all the well-meant regulatory laws which have been tried or proposed to curb the evil desires of men and nations, could be safely discarded, for in Christ is found all that is needed to give us moral and spiritual health. To turn to Jesus as the Great Physician is to repent, for He came to heal -- not the well -- but the sick. His message was for those who had lost their way. What His enemies said of Him in derision and contempt is blessedly true and the cause for everlasting praise, "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them."

But so long as men insist on attempting to justify themselves and their behavior they are under the divine condemnation. It is concerning him who cries, 'I have sinned and perverted that which was right and it profiteth me not,' that the voice of God exclaims, "Deliver him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom." (See Job 33:14-30.) We are told in Psalm 76:10, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain." It is another way of saying that all confessed sin shall be made to serve in the working out of God's eternal purpose. Where recognized guilt leads to repentance, the forgiven man rises to a consciously higher plane than he would otherwise have attained. Our sin becomes the dark background that better displays the lustrous jewel of divine grace. We know God better as forgiven sinners than Adam knew Him, as unfallen in that first earthly Paradise. It is this that makes the joy of heaven so great as the redeemed adore the Lamb and sing His praises who was slain in order that He might wash us from our sins in His own blood. Not one voice in that wondrous choir will attribute merit to other than Christ Himself.

In a recent book, in which one was objecting to expressions such as these, the writer challenged those who habitually confess themselves miserable sinners and acknowledge that they have left undone the things they ought to have done and done the things they ought not to have done, to dare to say such derogatory things of themselves when applying for a position of trust in some reputable firm, and the implication was that if such language was not suited as between man and man, it was not proper between man and God.

One does not have to be a "deep thinker" to see the fallacy of this. A man is hired by a firm because of his supposed ability and trustworthiness. But men's standards are altogether different from those set forth in the Holy Scriptures. Righteousness is emphasized in our dealings with our fellow men; holiness when it comes to relationship with God. A man's life may be outwardly correct and righteous, while his heart is corrupt and unholy. "The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart." He desires truth in the inward parts.

It is the pure in heart who shall see God. Therefore the absolute necessity of the new birth, apart from which there can be no spiritual enlightenment. The heart of the natural man is as a nest of every unclean and hateful bird; all sorts of evils come forth from it. The mind of the unsaved man is incapable of grasping heavenly realities. His understanding is darkened because of the ignorance that is in him. When he accepts God's testimony he takes the position of repentance, and is in an attitude where God can reveal to him the wonders of redeeming grace. In no other way can guilty man be reconciled to God, who beholdeth the proud afar off, but is nigh unto every broken and contrite heart.

If these pages fall into the hands of any anxious, troubled soul, desirous of finding the way of peace and earnestly seeking to be right with God, let me urge such a one to give up all struggling. Just believe God. Tell Him you are the sinner for whom the Saviour died, and trust in Christ alone for salvation. His own word is clear and simple: "Verily, verily I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death into life" (John 5:24).

To hear the Word is to receive God's testimony, and this is the very essence of repentance. When he who has spurned

that Word bows to its message, even though it tells him he is lost and undone and has no righteousness of his own, he turns from his vain thoughts and accepts instead the testimony of the Lord. It is to such a one that the Holy Spirit delights to present a crucified, risen, and exalted Christ as the one supreme object of faith. He who trusts Him is forever freed from all condemnation. (See John 3:18). He is henceforth in Christ, and "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

This is not to say his own conscience will never again condemn him, for that is not true. The nearer he lives to his Lord, the more tender his conscience will be. But it does mean that God no longer sees him as a sinner exposed to judgment, but that He counts him henceforth as a child, a member of the heavenly family, accepted in Christ, the beloved of the Father.

In this blessed relationship he has by no means done with repentance. He is called upon daily to judge himself in the light of the Word of Truth, as it is opened up to him by the Spirit, and so to repent of anything that he learns to be contrary to the mind of God. Otherwise he will have to know the Father's chastening rod. "For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world." (1st Corinthians 11:31-32.) It is in view of this that He says, "Be zealous therefore, and repent."

But I must bring these remarks to a conclusion. I need not multiply words. This book is, perhaps, already much too lengthy for busy readers, though I hope many will take time to examine carefully, in the light of the Holy Scriptures, every position taken. The conclusion of the whole matter is simply this: Repentance is not only desirable, but it is imperative and all important. Apart from it no sinner will ever be saved. God Himself commands all men everywhere to repent. Our Lord Jesus declared, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." That which it is so perilous to neglect should be faithfully preached to all for whom Christ died. And when men receive the message in faith and judge themselves in the light of the cross, they may know that all heaven resounds with gladness for "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (Luke 15:10).

The glorified throng in heaven will all be there, not because they were holier or in any wise better in themselves than other men, but because, as repentant sinners, they "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." He alone will be extolled as the Worthy One. All others who are ever saved will be saved through His merits alone.

The End

[Dr. Harry Ironside (1876-1951), a godly Fundamentalist author and teacher for many years, served as pastor of Chicago's Moody Memorial Church from 1930-1948]

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"The LORD is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me?" —Psalms 118:6

Psalms 56:9, "...this I know; for God is for me."

"Nobody can love God who doesn't love sinners!"

(a quote by Dr. Jack Hyles classic MP3 sermon, "The Happiest Man" (happiest is the man who will not impute sin to others!)

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